

# How the West Was Wondered: County Clare and Directions in Irish Ethnography

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Here we are in the County Clare  
It's a long, long, way from here to there,  
There's the Burren, and the Cliffs of Moher  
the Tulla, and the Kilfenor  
Miko Russle, Dr. Bill,  
Willie Clancy, Noel Hill  
Flutes and fiddles everywhere.  
If it's music you want  
You should go to Clare.

— from the song “Lisdoonvarna” by Christy Moore

Christy Moore, one of Ireland's most popular and respected singer-songwriters, performed this song at the Somerville Theater near Boston in 1986. This was three years after the end of the Woodstock-like music festivals that took place during the summers between 1977 and 1983 in Lisdoonvarna, a small resort town near the Atlantic in North Clare. Moore's performance of this song received a stunningly enthusiastic response in Somerville. Less than four bars into strumming the chords that introduce the piece, most people were on their feet sounding and gesturing their enthusiastic identification with it. Why, I wondered, would a song about County Clare bring this Boston-based house to its feet? Clare, in some collective flight of fancy, seemed to be ripped from its anchoring between Counties Galway and Limerick across the Atlantic and relocated in the Somerville Theater. At that time I knew little about Clare and even less about how it has been represented in both the popular and scholarly imagination.

Geographical locations are not only coordinates on maps and compasses, not merely particular physical landscapes. They are also cultural, political, and personal icons that evoke images, memories, emotions, and preconceptions. Many of the images associated with Clare have been and continue to be significant in the discourse about where one should (or should

not) conduct ethnographic research in Ireland.<sup>1</sup> In both the ethnographic literature about life in Clare and the review articles pertaining to that literature, Clare has become almost synonymous with the rural West of Ireland. In the recent discourse on the need for new directions in Irish ethnography, it may also represent the past, if one reads between the lines. Recent critiques of prior Irish ethnography address a number of topics including folklorists' and anthropologists' preoccupations with rural life in the West, the power of inceptive ethnographic models to shape the direction of research (particularly the "community model" used in Conrad Arensberg's *The Irish Countryman* 1937), and the need to redress the portrayals of Irish rural life as demoralized and devastated that dominated ethnographic writing during the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

Considering the criticisms found in reviews of Irish ethnography and conversations I have had with other anthropologists working in Ireland, it seems that many ethnographers are at best ambivalent about future ethnographic studies conducted in the West. Several recent retrospectives seek to "reset" the location of ethnographic relevance to urban centers in order to counter a historic preoccupation with rural Ireland. These advocates of a new agenda for Irish ethnography link what is modern with what is urban, and what is urban with what is relevant.<sup>3</sup> They advocate that future researchers target a number of topics for investigation that favor fieldwork in urban areas: rural migration to urban centers and resulting adaptation strategies, urbanization and sub-urbanization, economic development schemes and community organizing efforts in urban centers, women's issues, classism, poverty, unemployment, and youth culture.<sup>4</sup> The pressure to relocate fieldwork to urban areas is also fueled in part by a somewhat reductionist characterization of previous scholarly and literary writings on the West. This earlier research has been criticized as fundamentally skewed by romanticism and/or romantic nationalism and, therefore, unconnected to contemporary realities. Accordingly, topics conventionally associated with the West—especially folklore, broadly defined as traditional forms of expressive culture<sup>5</sup>—are, I think, particularly vulnerable to oversight or dismissal in this reformulation of what constitutes worthy research.

Theoretical approaches and orientations are some of the tools that social scientists use for understanding the "realities" of other people's lives and for alerting us to areas of cultural importance. I am, however, reluctant to allow theoretical trends to *determine* what is significant, meaningful, and relevant. Those sorts of determinations should come from what the researcher's informants, respondents, or collaborators think is meaningful and relevant. Consequently, while I enthusiastically applaud efforts to critically ponder the history and future of Irish ethnography, I hope that as the research agenda for Ireland is "reset," it will continue to

embrace *all* locations for research irrespective of where the fieldwork is conducted on the urban/rural continuum.

What follows is my argument for the importance of further ethnographic research on forms of expressive culture in the West. I begin with a consideration of my own fieldwork in Clare. Then, to demonstrate how we have arrived at a new agenda for future research in Ireland, I will briefly review the history of Irish ethnography situated in Clare and other western counties. Finally, I compare and contrast two different conceptions of Clare (one by an anthropologist and one by Christy Moore) to discuss the treatment of categories and their power to influence perceptions of place and questions of relevance. I conclude by arguing for a broader interpretation of relevance than that cast in recent retrospectives.

My fieldwork is largely based in Ennis, the county seat of Clare located in the West about midway along the Atlantic Coast.<sup>6</sup> My choice to conduct fieldwork in Clare was not determined by historical preoccupations with ostensibly authentic locations in the West of Ireland. At the same time, it is no accident that my research on Irish dancing led me to Clare.<sup>7</sup> Several visits to Clare during the mid 1980s, before I began graduate work, alerted me to the vibrancy of a revival in a form of traditional social dance known as “set dancing.”<sup>8</sup> The set dances from Clare have become some of the most popular in the revival. Through my fieldwork interviews, I began to understand that for a growing number of people the Clare sets were not only a form of recreation but served increasingly as an expression of a community’s consciousness of itself as a place with a particular identity.

It was this quality about the sets that most fascinated me. Unlike other forms of Irish dancing such as “step” and “*ceili* dancing,” the sets are not a national dance form regulated by a commission.<sup>9</sup> Rather, they are associated with particular counties, and usually with specific areas within a county. The revival’s momentum propelled the Clare sets, and consequently the people who dance them, into the realm of symbolic ambassadors. Being emblematic of both “Irishness” and specific geographical locations, the form moves at once between and among different levels of local, regional, and national life. This complexity distinguishes the sets from other related forms of Irish dance.

Further, the narratives I gathered over the course of my visits consistently express a consciousness about how and why the sets are linked to a range of larger social issues. Tensions between variety and standardization, individuality and consensus, participation in social life and the manner or quality of participation, local and national identity, and contested concepts of gender in movement all figure prominently in the discourse on and the practice of set dancing.<sup>10</sup>

If folklorists and anthropologists find these sorts of issues worth investigating, then projects like mine that focus on expressive culture in the West need no further justification.<sup>11</sup> However, those who advocate fieldwork in urban Ireland as the site of contemporary relevance may ask what pertinence and/or practical application these issues have in modern Irish life.

Consider the relevance of set dancing as a manifestation of local identity. Current European Union philosophy, driven in part by postmodern concerns about processes of cultural homogenization and multi-national economies, has given renewed respectability to the study of regional identities; aspects of E.U. structural funding policies designated for local initiatives are aimed at addressing these concerns. Ireland is one of the most administratively centralized countries in Europe, and some Irish academics (e.g., Whelan 1993:18-26) and policy makers (e.g., Barrington 1988 and 1991) have paid close attention to how E.U. programs are used and adopted locally. By examining how local people manage economic development and/or the development of social service initiatives supported in part by E.U. funds, policy makers hope to better understand how the concept of locality is expressed. For example, what other features besides administrative boundaries are utilized in a community's understanding of "place?" One strategy that has gained some currency is to look at various forms of expressive culture such as Donegal fiddling styles and the organization of hurling (a popular Irish sport) as concrete ways for exploring how "organic regions" are defined and delimited by locals (Whelan 1993:26-40). Whelan also specifically recognizes the potential of set dancing to serve a similar function.<sup>12</sup>

If we marginalize further ethnographic research in the West on forms of expressive culture that people themselves identify as important in their lives, we compromise a more comprehensive portrait of modern Irish life that includes the concerns, attitudes, and artistic expressions of people living in all locations—rural and urban—in Ireland.

A brief survey of modern ethnographies of communities in Clare will help us understand scholars' current reservations about further studies in Clare and the West in general. At issue is the intellectual history of present Irish ethnography. How and why have we arrived at the current push towards urban studies?

Arensberg conducted his fieldwork in north Clare during the mid 1930s, and published the first ethnography written by a modern anthropologist about life in a Western European village (*The Irish Countryman* 1937). Arensberg and his colleague, Solon Kimball, then published *Family and Community in Ireland* (1940), another ethnography based on the data they collected during their fieldwork. These two publications became powerful models for future

anthropological work not only in Ireland, but also in other rural sites in Europe (see Banfield 1958, Foster 1965, Friedl 1962, and Redfield 1960). Like their European colleagues in folklore and ethnology, American ethnographers working in Europe during the 1950s and 1960s were primarily interested in traditional “peasant cultures” residing within modern nation states. Like the majority of anthropologists working in non-Western locations, their methodologies were designed for small village life. Reflecting various functionalist theories popular during the first half of the century, ethnographers often portrayed small communities as bounded, homogeneous groups whose forms of social structure and organization remained stable (Goddard, Llobera, and Shore 1994:3). The existence of conflict within and between communities was often neglected. Social roles and responsibilities were portrayed as being universally understood, and relationships of social and economic reciprocity and obligation were portrayed as functioning smoothly.

While many subsequent ethnographers working in Ireland after Arensberg and Kimball also selected rural field sites in the West, at least two of these in Clare, their portraits of rural life were very different. John Messenger’s *Innis Beg* (1969) addressed the “psycho-cultural” nature of communities on the Aran Islands off the west coasts of Galway and Clare, and to a lesser extent, of communities in West Clare. Hugh Brody’s *Inishkillane* (1973) focused on rural decline in small communities in the West of Ireland, and part of the fieldwork for his comparative analysis took place in Clare. Broadly speaking, theoretical trends of the day sought to demonstrate the inevitable social, cultural, and economic havoc modernization brings to rural and/or peasant communities. The ethnographies of the 1960s and 1970s reflected these theories, finding social decay and anomie, economic decline, and conflict rampant. These portrayals of Irish rural social life as irrevocably shattered and unhealthy replaced the seamless and smooth representations of social organization drawn by Arensberg thirty to forty years earlier. By the 1980s, however, these descriptions came under weighty attack by foreign anthropologists working in Ireland, as well as by Irish scholars.<sup>13</sup>

Emphasizing Clare’s reputation in modern ethnography as an important location of Irishness, contemporary anthropologist Hervé Varenne refers to Flan O’Brien’s satire, *The Poor Mouth* (1986 [1941]), in which O’Brien masterfully lampoons nationalist and literary idealizations of Gaelic peasant life in the West.<sup>14</sup> Varenne describes the view from the house of O’Coonassa, O’Brien’s protagonist, in this way:

Through the right hand window one can see the field sites of Fox (1978) and Taylor (1980, 1981) in Donegal. Through the door one can see the island where Messenger (1969) did his work. From the window to the

left one can see Scheper-Hughes (1979). The house, clearly, is facing West, with Connemara and Donegal on its North and Kerry on its South. This locates it in the County Clare of Arensberg and Kimball (1940), Brody (1973), Cresswell (1969), the County Clare that remains the touchstone of Irishness. (1989:134)

The reflexive turn in anthropological writing over the past fifteen years has given us a more rigorous awareness of how we know what we know. Epistemological queries and debates have included discussions of how personal curiosities have generated currents of anthropological scholarship. In some cases, such curiosities have lead to the creation of whole categories of study, particularly "area studies" in which "the Mediterranean" and "Andalusia" have figured prominently (Boissevain 1977, Davis 1977, Herzfeld 1985, Mark 1987, and Pina-Cabral 1989).<sup>16</sup> We seem to be at a crossroads in Irish ethnography. How can we best manage the intersection between efforts which seek to deperipheralize Irish ethnography in the social science literature about Europe without simultaneously marginalizing the rural and/or western parts of the country? Further, in what ways will the new agenda effect how future ethnographers of Ireland choose their interdisciplinary partners be they folklorists, sociologists, urban planners, or development specialists?

Consider the notion of categories (e.g., urban and rural, modern and traditional) and the way our scholarly curiosities shape their formulation. Twelve years ago, Thomas Wilson wrote a comprehensive article, "From Clare to the Common Market: Perspectives on Irish Ethnography" (1984), in which he presented a critique of both Arensberg and Kimball's work and of subsequent ethnographies done on Ireland through the 1970s. What interests me here is the significance of the article's title. Clare is the location from which we look out either towards other parts of the country, or in this case, towards what at that time was called the European Common Market (E.C.), the supra-national. In his article, Wilson directs our attention to the critical need to understand the significance of the internationalization of Irish society through its participation in the E.C. since 1973. Wilson's awareness of the burgeoning importance of globalization processes and theories is evident. The title, however, situates Clare and the Common Market as two separate points on a continuum—"from" here and "to" there. The distance between the two suggests other oppositions such as the past and the future, the rural and the urban, and the provincial and the international. The title of this article, like the title of *Irish Urban Cultures* (Curtin, Donnan, and Wilson 1993), depends on distinct categories that admit little overlap or

continuity, categories that rely more fully on discontinuity and difference for defining their relationship to each other.

In contrast to Wilson, Christy Moore offers in his song "Lisdoonvarna" a different portrayal of Clare and of the relationships between categories such as urban, modern, rural, and traditional.

Some head off to exotic places,  
Others go to the Galway races.  
Mattie goes to the South of France,  
Jim to the dogs, Peter to the dance.  
A cousin of mine goes potholin',  
A cousin of hers loves Joe Dolan.  
As the summer comes around each year,  
We go there and they come here  
Some head off to Frijiliana  
But I always go to Lisdoonvarna  
Oh, Lisdoonvarna....

Moore's lyrics convey a much stronger sense of coming and going, of the fluidity between Clare and the rest of the country and beyond. Moore addresses the overlap between supposed binaries while Wilson writes of dichotomies. In other stanzas, Moore sings about "a 747 for Jackson Browne, a special runway to bring him down," and "The multitudes they flocked in throngs/ To hear the music and the songs....McGraths, O'Briens, Pippins, Cox's/ Massage parlours in horse boxes, Arab sheiks....Hindu Sikhs, Jesus freaks....Van the Man and Emmy Lou,/ Movin' Hearts and Planxty too." Moore celebrates Clare's ability to act not merely as some bastion of traditionalism or as a "touchstone of Irishness," but as a place that welcomes the juncture between the modern and the traditional, or more accurately, the modern *in* the traditional. This may be one reason why Moore's audience literally rose to their feet in Somerville. Lisdoonvarna became one of many symbols that represented modern Ireland in the mid 1980s. For Moore, Clare is both here *and* there, now *and* then.

My own research has convinced me that forms of expressive culture like set dancing performed in Clare and elsewhere in Ireland more generally are every bit as important to a more comprehensive view of Irish society as urban-rural migration, development schemes, and urbanization. Further, I am convinced that these topics often overlap. For those interested in dismantling the modern/traditional and urban/rural dichotomies as well as exploring the interpenetration of urban and rural identities, the resurgence in set and other forms of Irish dance has important implications for studies in urban settings, particularly those concerned with relocation strategies. For example, people use set dancing as an important vehicle for networking

in Dublin and as a means for expressing and maintaining a sense of identity with their home counties. At the same time, they recognize the set dance revival as part of a larger national (and one could argue, international) phenomenon. Cultural tourism schemes involving Irish music and dance previously undertaken by the Irish Tourist Board, and to a lesser extent, Shannon Development in the Midwest region, provide other examples of the overlap and interplay between the urban and rural, traditional and popular culture, and the expressive arts and economics.

President Mary Robinson, in her recent historic visit to London to meet with leaders of the British government, made extensive use of Irish music to characterize contemporary Ireland. Since she could have chosen any out of hundreds of metaphors, I found her selection of this form of expressive culture highly significant, especially in light of the event: the first official visit to London by an Irish President. Known for her elegant rhetorical prowess, President Robinson likened Ireland to the dynamism and openness of musical creativity:

We are a country with a strikingly young population who are constantly in the process of revising and strengthening our identity. That identity, I like to think, is somewhat like the strength of Irish music at this moment: always able to draw on the past and always open to the energies and influences of the present. If you come to Dublin...you will hear music on every side; the traditional music and songs of the past, the chamber music of Britain and Europe, and the rock music and country music of the United States of America. And all of them effortlessly absorbed into a confident national music which is never narrow.

*(Irish Times, 6 June 1996)*

Following President Robinson's vision of integration, let us keep our considerations of "relevance" from becoming too narrow. Criticisms and retrospectives of past ethnography in Ireland have much merit, and research on urban culture is indeed sorely needed and should continue. Surely, however, this need does not have to be met at the expense of researching overlapping topics in a range of geographic settings in Ireland. It is my hope that past preoccupations with the West do not generate a new set of preoccupations that direct us away from it.



## Notes

Many thanks to Ray Cashman, Rick Gagné, Frank Hall, and Theresa Vaughan for their comments on various drafts of this piece.

1 While my training is in anthropology, I not only recognize but embrace joint aims of both cultural anthropology and folklore, and I readily acknowledge that the ethnographic enterprise falls under the purview not only of anthropology, but of folklore, sociology, and other related disciplines as well.

2 These critical retrospectives reflect a similar set of concerns within the larger arena of European ethnography. Questions about what constitutes a field or fields of study, where to work, and how to conduct research, shape this discussion and seem particularly vexing for ethnographers working in Europe and other industrialized and/or post-industrialized locations.

3 This short article was largely motivated by the "Introduction" to Curtin, Donnan, and Wilson's *Irish Urban Cultures* (1993) in which the editors make the case that "ethnographers of Ireland should shake off the fetters of their anthropological tradition and training and immerse themselves in the actualities of an Ireland entering the twenty-first century....If anthropologists want to understand how Irish people actually live, they must shift their attention to Ireland's cities. In doing so, they may begin the process of de-peripheralizing Ireland, and allowing it to inform the comparative analysis of modern life, in Europe and beyond" (13–14). Although the editors consistently acknowledge the worthiness of recent theorizing that deconstructs the urban/rural binary, the purpose and thus the conceptual organization of the book underscores the importance of urban cultures throughout the volume. As they also point out, the paucity of urban European ethnographic research has been the subject of persistent criticism since at least the late 1950s.

4 Curtin, Donnan, and Wilson, 1993. See also Wilson 1984, Curtin and Wilson 1989, and Peace 1989.

5 The term "expressive culture" is used here in a very general sense to refer to the aesthetic, disciplined, and purposeful manipulation of form (movement, music, song, speech, materials, etc.) within particular cultural contexts. In my view, the sibling disciplines of cultural anthropology and folklore are fundamentally interested in similar goals—exploring and analyzing the dynamics of social life and the cultural factors that help give shape to it by focusing on individuals and/or groups who participate in various, overlapping realms of expressive culture.

6 My preliminary fieldwork took place in Ennis where I lived for two months during the summer of 1991. I returned in October of 1993 and stayed until July of 1994. I had also visited Ireland during the summers of 1986 and 1987, and it was during the first that I met and befriended my dance teachers (residents of Ennis)

who later became my most important collaborators. Ennis and its immediate environs has a population of roughly 17,000 people and is considered an urban center.

7 Where there is music, there is apt to be dancing, and while traditional music can be found all over Ireland, Clare certainly enjoys a reputation as a strong center for music and dance. I cannot delve into the historical reasons for this perception here, but my point is that this reputation operates both symbolically and literally. It is imagined and enacted.

8 Briefly, "the sets," as they are commonly called, are derivatives of the French quadrilles popular during the Napoleonic Court of the late eighteenth century. A set consists of four couples arranged in a square formation who dance a sequence or "set" of figures. Brought to the Irish countryside over the course of generations, largely through itinerant and/or locally-based dancing masters, the sets are thought to have been the most popular form of social dance in rural areas by the beginning of this century. A combination of factors (nationalism, state and church actions, immigration, economic prosperity, and television) led to the gradual but steady decline in the practice of the form through the 1950s. The resurgence in set dancing during the early 1980s followed on the heels of the revival in traditional Irish music that was well under way by this time. This dance revival has been particularly healthy in urban centers such as the cities of Dublin, Cork, and Galway. See Breandán Breathnach's *Dancing in Ireland* (1983) for historical information on set and other types of Irish dancing.

9 An *Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha*, the Irish Dance Commission, was founded in the late 1920s under the auspices of *Connradh na Gaedhilge*, the Gaelic League. It has authority to license teachers who teach these forms, to select adjudicators for competitions, and to organize *feiseanna*, literally festivals, but more widely known as step dance competitions.

10 In 1989, Chris Curtin and Colm Ryan published an article entitled "Clubs, Pubs and Private Houses in a Clare Town" (in Curtin and Wilson 1989) that addresses the shifting but persistent class divisions in these realms of social life in Ennis between the 1930s and 1980s. They state that pubs and lounge bars predominate as venues for contemporary social life, but their research does not scrutinize the activities and practices that actually take place in them. My work seeks to complement and extend research like theirs by highlighting the social and cultural significance of people's participation in set dancing.

11 My research was inspired by my observation of what Bourdieu calls "practice" (1977:16–22): a repertoire of devices, schemes, and techniques which people both draw from and generate in response to certain circumstances. My analysis is guided by performance-centered approaches to the study of social life that have matured over the past twenty years and by scholars who have specifically attended to the anthropological study of human movement systems. See the writings of scholars influenced by Dell Hymes's formulation of the ethnography of speaking (1972 and

1974) and Erving Goffman's notion of the presentation of the self (1959 and 1974): Bauman (1977 and 1986), Bauman and Briggs (1990), Bauman and Sherzer (1989), and Sherzer (1987). See also Farnell (1994a, 1994b, and 1995), Kaepler (1972 and 1986), Royce (1977 and 1984) and Williams (1982 and 1991).

12 Whelan writes that, "A similar standardization occurred in Irish dancing in the early twentieth century, and it is only with the relatively recent (and bottom-up) resurgence of set dancing that the variety of regional styles has reasserted itself"(31).

13 See Nancy Scheper-Hughes' *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics* (1979) and Robert Cresswell's *Une Communauté Rurale d'Irlande* (1969) for additional ethnographies highlighting the notion of decline in rural Irish societies. Scheper-Hughes' ethnography has been the subject of some criticism. See, for example, Eileen Kane's "Stereotypes and Irish Identity: Mental Illness as a Cultural Frame" (1986).

14 Social scientists were certainly not the first to act and comment on Clare's role as a "touchstone of Irishness." By the beginning of this century Counties Clare, Galway (and especially the areas of Connemara and the Aran Islands), Donegal, and Kerry came to symbolize the last outposts of authentic Gaelic culture. Several well-known writers associated with the Irish Literary Renaissance such as John M. Synge, W. B. Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, and Thomas Moore not only looked but went West in search of stories, tales, songs, and the pastimes of everyday life to inspire a new Irish literature and drama written in the English language. By the early 1920s, however, the tide had turned, and a wave of new Irish playwrights and writers caustically recoiled from the romanticism, and in some instances nationalism, of their predecessors. Interestingly, social science literature followed a parallel track, only decades later.

15 Edward Said's monumental *Orientalism* (1978) was a significant contribution to this period of intense anthropological self examination.

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